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June 2, 2009

President Barack Obama  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

At the end of last month, you received a letter signed by an overwhelming number of my House colleagues on the importance of your efforts to bring about peace in the Middle East, between Israel and its Arab neighbors. On reading it, I agreed with everything in it with one exception, but I feel sufficiently strongly about that exception so that I did not sign it, but instead chose to send you this letter expressing my agreement with all but that one point.

I do want to make it very clear that I agree completely with points 3 and 4 of the letter: "continuation of our insistence on an absolute Palestinian commitment to end violence, terror, and incitement and to build the institutions necessary for a viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the Jewish state of Israel inside secure borders;" and the "promotion of far greater involvement and participation by the Arab states both in moving toward normal ties with Israel and in supporting moderate Palestinians."

But I think that the assertion in point 2 that "The proven best way forward is to work closely and privately (emphasis added) together both on areas of agreement and especially on areas of disagreement" is a mistake, both from the standpoint of the importance of the role of electorates in our two democracies, and in fact in promoting genuine cooperation.

Obviously as strong friends and allies, with overwhelming areas of mutual interest, America and Israel should be working closely together and seek to maximize our cooperative efforts, as we have been able to do in the sixty years since Israel was created. But it is inevitable in any relationship that there will be legitimate disagreements. In the case of the United States and Israel, fortunately, these are not disagreements about goals, but rather the best methods to achieve them. Given the fact that we are both democracies where public policy should ultimately set with the support of the people in each country, it would be a mistake to refuse to discuss important differences on how to achieve our mutual goals in a way that the electorates in both countries could understand.

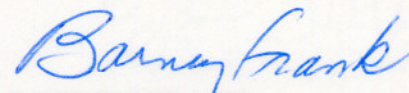
For example, I think it would be a mistake if the American people were not able to learn what the Israeli government thinks about our approaches to Iran. This is a very complex issue, and it is clear that there are strong opinions in the Israel government that the American approach has on occasion not been tough enough. I do not think that the American people should be denied the chance to know what the Israeli government thinks on this issue. Conversely, I believe it is very important for the Israeli public to know that there is strong disagreement within the United States



– not just within our government – over exactly how to deal with the question of settlements in the West Bank. My view, as a strong supporter of Israel's right to remain a secure, democratic Jewish state is that the one area of vulnerability for Israel in terms of American support is in the area of settlements. Just as I believe the American public should know what the Israeli government thinks about our approach to Iran, I think it would be a denial of an important principle of democracy for the Israeli electorate not to know what the state of American opinion is regarding the settlements.

As I have noted, in neither of the two examples I have cited is there a disagreement over goals, but there are legitimate and important differences from time-to-time on what are the specific ways of reaching those goals, and I believe that the democratic nature of our two societies means that it would be a mistake to try to muffle discussion of these.

I should add that I understand that some who argue that disagreements between us should be kept private fear that a public airing could damage the relationship, or give aid and comfort to enemies. As to the first point, I believe that the relationship between our two countries is so strong that a public discussion of disagreements in a civil and respectful tone holds no threat whatsoever to it. Indeed, it is in the early stages of relationships, when they are fragile, that the two parties are well advised to withhold criticism. A strong, friendly and mature cooperation gains strength when the two parties are honest with each other about difference. And with regard to strengthening enemies, I believe that it is the democratic nature of our two societies that is at the core of our strength and of the strength of our relationships and I do not think that referring publicly to difference – which are of course generally known anyway – does no harm. In fact, honestly discussing differences in a constructive way is often a means of containing any damage that might be done if they are treated as secrets and are thus open to distortion.

  
BARNEY FRANK